

You know what it means, but have you ever had the feeling? Have you ever experienced what Harvard professor Amy Edmondson first described a quarter of a century ago—psychological safety, the belief you can share ideas or speak up without the risk of being put down by others? Have you ever worked in a team that operates in that way? Our research with thousands of teams suggests that if you have felt psychological safety, you're one of the lucky few. Over 20 years, we have found that 72% of team members avoid conflict, and the average team scores just 2.4 on our 5-point diagnostic scale on their ability to speak truth to each other. We all talk about it—most of us are striving for it in our organizations—but not that many of us really know what it's like.

The Psychological Safety Gap

I've been privileged to see psychological safety in play with a number of world-class teams and seen the transformative effect it can have on how they work. It creates candor, accountability, and is part of the "give-a-damn about each other" working relationships that generate the commitment to teammates as well as getting the job done. I'd say that psychological safety is one of the defining characteristics of what I describe in my new bestseller, *Never Lead Alone*, as teamship. Teamship is the ultimate competitive advantage where peers co-lead teams and elevate each other to achieve world-class performance.

When Teams Master Psychological Safety

While good teams rely on leaders to create psychological safety from the top down, great teams build it peer-to-peer through the commitment to lifting each other up and pushing each other higher. In world-class teams that score 4.5 on our 5-point diagnostic scale for candor, psychological safety is one of the factors that helps to unlock innovation, speeds decision-making, and drives breakthrough performance.

Two Leaders Who Cracked the Code

Take Bill Connors at Comcast. As president of Xfinity, Connors leads the largest broadband and pay TV operator in the United States, serving over 52 million customers and generating \$60 billion in revenue. When he gathers his senior team for what he calls "Things That Matter Outlier Team Meetings," he sets a clear tone: "This isn't the time or place for parade laps about how well the team is doing," says Connors. "Everybody's airing their dirty laundry. Everyone is talking about everyone's problems and everybody's focus is on how to get these operational

problems fixed.” This approach has built his business units into market share growth engines, becoming the largest individual EBITDA contributor among all business units in the Comcast/NBCUniversal family.

At iHeartMedia, Chairman and CEO Bob Pittman—a Hall of Fame media industry veteran who co-founded MTV and previously served as CEO of MTV Networks and AOL Networks—took psychological safety even further. As leader of America’s number one audio company, reaching nine out of ten Americans monthly through its network of 860+ radio stations, digital platforms, and podcast business, Pittman made dissent a corporate value. “We welcome dissent across the team and want to hear it because it’s essential,” says Pittman. “Interdisciplinary dissent is always about the solutions to a real challenge, it’s not saying ‘That’s useless, I don’t like it, I don’t believe it, that will never work.’ That’s just grumbling. Proper dissent can be pointing out that something might not work because ‘I have this insight you may not have from your vantage point or experiences, and I also have this idea to consider.’”

How Great Teams Make It Real: The Power of Three

One of the most powerful yet overlooked practices of team collaboration is the Power of Three. By breaking the whole team into smaller groups of three people—even just for five to eight minutes—you unleash massive psychological safety. Our data shows that candor in small breakout rooms is 85% higher than when teams meet as a single cohort. In these small groups, whether they are when teams are together in an office or working virtually, people have more courage to share openly. In a large meeting room, it can be as simple as turning chairs toward each other for smaller group discussions.

As Pittman explains: “I used to think that we would have good healthy discussions in rooms of fifteen people. Then you’d go out of the meeting and see two people in a hallway saying what really needed to be said in the room we just walked out of, but they didn’t have the time or confidence. When we use small conversation pods, we get a more fulsome view of what’s happening and a much better debate. If we don’t use it, I know where the truth will be found, it’ll be out in the hallway after the meeting, and we will all suffer from it.”

Creating Your Team’s Breakthrough

The impact is transformative. Teams that embrace psychological safety achieve

what our research shows distinguishes world-class teams: collaboration and accountability both increase dramatically. At iHeart, Pittman reinforces this through a simple rule: “Don’t say anything in my office you wouldn’t say in the STRATCOM meeting... And I don’t want a recitation of what you’ve done. Please don’t bring that to that meeting. Bring exceptions, bring places where you are struggling, and bring places where others are holding you up.”

In today’s business environment, psychological safety isn’t a nice-to-have—it’s a strategic imperative. The choice is clear: continue with traditional approaches where candor is rare and innovation is stifled, or build teams where psychological safety unleashes the full potential of every member. Are you ready to make the shift?